

Readers' Recipes to Spice Up Your Summer!



How about having a Mexican-themed outdoor dinner one night this summer?

Here are some readers' recipes to get your party started:

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10 Commandments of Great Party Giving

Susan Ray's Navajo Fry Bread

Susan Ray's Indian Chili

Nayda's Hot Taco Dip

Kay's Mango Dip

Roasted Corn and Mushroom Salsa

Enchilada Casserole Gillihan

Susan Ray's Navajo Fry Bread

You Will Need

2 cups flour

2 teaspoons baking powder

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon powdered milk

1/2 cup shortening or butter
3/4 cup warm water
Up to 2 cups oil for frying

What to Do

1. Mix dry ingredients together; use a fork to add shortening. Add enough water to make dough. Knead until dough is soft, not sticky. Form into six 2-inch balls. Flatten to make a circle 6 inches in diameter.
2. Heat 1 inch oil in heavy skillet and slide in dough. Fry on one side until golden brown, about two minutes, flip. Drain on paper towels.

Serve with toppings (sliced meat, grilled vegetables, sour cream, guacamole, cheese, salsa) or with Ray's Indian Chili recipe.

Serves: 6

Susan Ray's Indian Chili

Susan makes a vegetarian chili to accompany her Navajo fry bread, but the recipe can be made with ground beef for a non-vegetarian version. Experiment with the amount of hot sauce to make it more or less spicy.

You Will Need

1 tablespoon oil
1 small onion, minced
1 bell pepper, minced
1 cup crumbled Smart Ground brand texturized vegetable protein (tofu) or 1 cup ground beef
4 cups cooked pinto beans (or two cans, drained)
3 cups tomato puree
1 cup chopped fresh tomatoes
1 teaspoon minced chile pepper
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon chili powder
Hot sauce to taste

What to Do

1. In a frying pan over low heat, cook onion and pepper until soft. Add tofu or beef and cook until browned. Add pinto beans, tomato puree, tomatoes, chile pepper, salt, and chili powder and cook for thirty minutes. Taste; adjust seasoning with additional salt and hot sauce to suit.

Serves: 6

Nayda's Hot Taco Dip

Nayda Schwartz tasted hot taco dip at a backyard barbecue twenty years ago and has been making it for parties ever since.

"It takes ten minutes to make and it's usually gone in about the same time," says Schwartz, who is a trust advisor in Farmington Hills, Michigan. It is, she says, the rare invitation that does not include a request that she bring along her famous dip, which can, in fact, be made at home and baked off at the party.

Although she usually serves it as an appetizer, Schwartz has also turned her hot taco dip into a main course by serving it with a big salad.

You Will Need

- 1 8-ounce brick of cream cheese, softened (do not use reduced-fat version)
- 1 can Hormel meat chili
- 1 8-ounce package of shredded, "taco-seasoned" cheese (do not use low-fat version)
- 1 bunch scallions, minced

What to Do

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Using a spatula or frosting spreader, spread cream cheese over bottom of a shallow 9 x 13-inch baking dish. Spread chili in an even layer over the cream cheese. Sprinkle shredded cheese over this and, finally, sprinkle scallions over chili.
2. Bake until bubbling and slightly brown on top and around the edges, about 30 minutes. It can burn easily, so watch carefully. Remove from oven; allow to sit and thicken for five minutes before serving. Serve with sturdy taco chips.

Serves: 4-6

Kay's Mango Dip

Kay Young lived in California for many years, and after moving to Ohio to work as a food chemist, she kept her memories of that spicy, flavorful California food alive by joining the Cincinnati Pepper Club, a group of pepper gardeners and cooks. During the growing season (April-October), the club meets once a month. The only requirement: Everyone must bring something hot and something cold. This mango salsa, which can be served with chips or as a relish for meat, is both hot and cold. For a spicier salsa, add more minced chiles.

You Will Need

- 2 large tomatoes, chopped
- 1 medium white onion, minced
- 2 medium mangos, cut into fine dice
- 1 jalapeño pepper, seeds removed, minced
- Juice from 1/2 lime

1/2 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon pepper
1/4 teaspoon sugar, if needed
1/4 cup minced coriander leaves

What to Do

1. Mix all ingredients together and allow to sit, refrigerated, for several hours before serving.

Makes about 4 cups

Roasted Corn and Mushroom Salsa

This earthy mixture is great with grilled chicken, pork, or fish and makes a wonderful addition to any taco. It can also be served as a salad, topped with lobster or shrimp, or as an appetizer.

You Will Need

5 ears fresh corn
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 cup fresh shiitake or other wild mushrooms, cleaned and diced
2 large poblano chiles, roasted, peeled, seeded, and diced
1 teaspoon minced fresh marjoram
1 clove roasted garlic, peeled
1/2 teaspoon sherry vinegar
1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
1 teaspoon kosher salt, plus more to taste

What to Do

1. Cut corn kernels from cobs. Heat a cast-iron skillet over high heat until almost smoking. Add one layer of kernels and cook in cast-iron skillet without oil, tossing constantly, until corn is smoky and dark, about five minutes. Place in large bowl and repeat until all the corn is cooked.

2. Heat olive oil in sauté pan over medium-high heat. Add mushrooms and sauté until tender, about five minutes. Add corn. Add remaining ingredients and mix well. Season with additional salt, if needed. Serve at room temperature. Store, refrigerated, in an airtight container, for up to two days.

Makes 3 cups

Enchilada Casserole Gillihan

When they were young, Carolyn Gillihan and her husband were hippies who lived off the land in the Pacific Northwest. This recipe was given to them by a good friend and -- along with stories of their long-haired years -- remains a favorite of their five sons today.

"I make it for birthdays and family get-togethers," says Carolyn, who, like her husband, Charles, was eventually ordained as a minister. The couple live in Columbus, Indiana, where Carolyn's enchilada casserole is a favorite at church potlucks.

Carolyn serves the casserole with a big salad and sweet corn and doubles, triples, or even quadruples it when cooking for large crowds. The casserole can be made a day ahead, refrigerated, and baked an hour before guests arrive.

You Will Need

1 tablespoon cooking oil
1 large onion, chopped fine
2 large cloves garlic, chopped fine
2 pounds ground chuck
2 cups fresh homemade salsa or one 16-ounce jar salsa (mild, medium, or hot, according to taste)
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
1 teaspoon cumin
1 cup white cream sauce (see recipe below)
8 flour tortillas
1/4 cup (1/2 stick) butter, melted
1 cup sour cream
1/2 pound cheddar cheese, grated

What to Do

1. Preheat oven to 325°F. In a skillet, sauté the onion and garlic in cooking oil until soft, remove and set aside. Add the meat to the pan and cook, using a fork to prevent clumping, until no pink is visible. Add the onion, garlic, and salsa to this mixture and season with salt, pepper, and cumin. Prepare the white cream sauce.

2. Dip 6 tortillas in melted butter and arrange over bottom and sides of a shallow 9 x 13-inch baking dish. Spoon in meat mixture and cover with remaining two tortillas. Add sour cream to white cream sauce and spread this mixture over top of the casserole. Sprinkle with grated cheese. Bake at 325°F for 45 minutes.

White Cream Sauce

You Will Need

4 tablespoons butter
6 tablespoons unbleached white flour
1 cup warm milk
1/8 teaspoon salt

What to Do

1. In a saucepan, melt butter over medium heat. Add flour, whisking to make a thick paste. Slowly add milk while whisking to avoid lumps. Add salt and continue cooking for two minutes until smooth and warm.

Serves: 6

10 Commandments of Great Party Giving

These simple rules will help make throwing your next bash a breeze.

For some of us, the mere thought of entertaining just our nearest and dearest strikes terror in our hearts. For others, a house full of guests is true happiness. As an inveterate party giver, I've learned that throwing even a big holiday party doesn't have to be difficult, and can actually be fun -- if you follow certain rules. Wherever you fall on the entertaining spectrum, here are our ten commandments for making any party an unqualified success.

1. Sharpen Your Pencil and Start Planning Now

It wouldn't be a bad idea to start planning your party the moment you finish reading this. Seriously, the more time you have before the Big Day, the more shopping and cooking that you can do well in advance -- instead of in a mad rush at the end.

The first step is to create three master lists (guests, menu, shopping) that will help you keep track of everything for the party. Keep the lists in your wallet or date book, so you'll know exactly what you still need to purchase and how many guests have RSVP'd at all times.

Your Guest List:

You might want to call those guests whose presence you consider essential before you even set the date for your party. Inevitably, not everyone you ask will be able to come. But if "it just wouldn't be the same without them," make sure they're free and invite them then and there. Your other guests should be invited as soon as you set the date. Try to give people no less than three weeks' notice - remember, holiday schedules fill up fast. A good strategy: Invite friends and family by phone, then follow up with a written reminder.

Your Food and Drink List:

Whether you're planning a brunch, buffet, or a cocktail party, food and drink are your party's most important ingredients. The first item to determine is the main dish. Jot down a list of recipes you're confident that you can cook well and that

are proven crowd pleasers. Remember, to you it may be the same old lasagna, but to your guests it could be a new taste treat. If you do want to serve a dish you've never cooked before, be sure to test the recipe at least once (twice is even safer) before the party.

After you've figured out the main course, build the rest of the menu around it, following that same "I feel confident I can make this" rule. And don't make things too hard on yourself. If you'll be cooking a complicated main dish, go for simple appetizers and side dishes that can be easily prepared in advance.

Next, take a careful look at the yields of the recipes you'll be using to be sure they will make enough to feed your crowd. If your favorite wild rice recipe serves four but you're inviting eight, be sure it can be easily doubled before you put it on the menu.

Finally, don't forget to add beverages to your list. Plan to have a variety of nonalcoholic drinks on hand. It's best to buy more than you think you'll need. And buy lots of ice the day of the party. That way, you won't have to waste precious fridge space to chill bottles of soda. When it comes to alcohol, don't feel obligated to set up a full bar. Unless you're having a cocktail party, it's fine to limit your selections to wine and beer, and perhaps a special punch. Whatever you serve, encourage moderation -- the last thing you want people to remember about your party is a hangover.

Your Shopping List:

Look over each item on your menu and list everything you'll need to make it happen. Note each ingredient (including garnishes), then check your pantry and your spice rack. Nothing's more annoying than thinking "I'm sure I have that" only to find out that you don't when it's time to add it to the recipe.

Now is also the time to be sure that you have the equipment all the dishes on your menu call for -- whether it's a food processor or a particular size roasting pan. Whatever you don't have, borrow from friends or buy cheaply at a local restaurant-supply store. If you entertain often, the right equipment is worth the investment. Keep in mind that it takes twice as long to make cookies if you have only one baking sheet instead of the two required, and ten times as long to chop some ingredients by hand than by food processor.

In addition, count up the plates and platters, serving utensils, glasses, silverware, cocktail and dinner napkins and even tablecloths you'll need. Don't forget serving trays, punch bowls, coffee urns and folding chairs. If you're short, call your local party-rental place and reserve what you need now. The holiday season in particular is one of the biggest times of the year for party rentals and you don't want to be scrambling to find essentials at the last moment. Many people would rather borrow from friends and family than rent. But why risk Mother's fine china, when most party rentals have a breakage allowance built into the cost?

2. Appeal to The Eye As Well As The Taste Buds

I have a friend who swears that if there's any other food available, no one will touch the large platters of raw vegetables and dip he bothers to prepare. But this particular host never fails to make such crudites the centerpiece of his buffet. Why? Because with their wonderful colors and textures, they look gorgeous, whether they get eaten or not! In planning your menu, take time to make sure you have as many colors and textures as possible. Think red peppers, tangerines, yellow squash and green beans to brighten up all-brown, or otherwise bland-looking dishes.

Garnishes are another great way to add color. As professional chefs know, most garnishes only *look* difficult to create, yet they have the power to make even a simple dish look special. And if radish roses and cucumber fans seem too fancy, you can get that restaurant look with a few well-placed sprigs of fresh herbs.

3. Make Sure Your Kitchen Can Get the Job Done

It's quite pointless to plan a party that your kitchen can't handle. Every kitchen has space constraints; make sure you know yours. For example, can your refrigerator fit all those platters of cold hors d'oeuvres? Can your stove handle heating the five dishes you plan to serve hot at the same time? If not, now's the time to make adjustments and substitutions. You can avoid kitchen crunch by choosing a menu of foods served at a variety of temperatures and preparing as many dishes in advance as possible (some can be made as much as a month ahead). The one catch: Don't forget to allow enough time for defrosting and reheating on party day.

If you run out of storage space, be creative. I've been known to stow food in the microwave and warm bread on top of the dryer in the laundry room. If it's really cold outside, the porch or garage can serve as a second refrigerator. And speaking of the fridge, now's a good time to clean it out. You can reclaim lots of space by removing any items that can be stored elsewhere or that should have been tossed long ago.

4. Shop Smart

The sanest way to shop for a party is in stages. Divide your shopping list by store and buy all the nonperishables you need as early as possible.

Consider some alternate resources for what you need. Read the ads in the newspaper to see what's on sale at the supermarkets in your area. It may be worth the trip to an unfamiliar store to save money on the big-ticket items on your menu, such as fillet of beef, turkey, ham or shrimp. And don't forget the local beverage warehouse, where soft drinks and beer are often priced substantially below supermarkets.

Finally, thrift shops can yield wonderful finds for entertaining. Extra glasses,

tableware, silver and candlesticks can often be had at a fraction of what new ones would cost.

5. Set a Gorgeous Table

A beautifully set table can make even plain food look elegant and inviting. And you don't need to spend a lot of money to do it. Start with a great tablecloth, especially if your dining-room table has seen better days. Tablecloths cover a multitude of sins while adding color, pattern, even drama to your party. If you don't own the perfect tablecloth, search out thrift shops and antique stores for old linens. Don't feel limited to standard tablecloths -- I've seen beautifully patterned sheets called into action. Even large square silk scarves can make a statement when placed on a diagonal over a plain white tablecloth. Whatever kind of cloth you use, place a felt pad or plastic liner on the table first to protect its surface.

When it comes to centerpieces, don't limit your thinking to flowers. Fruits, vegetables, a ball of Christmas balls at the holidays, even toys can add whimsy and charm to your table setting. I remember a gorgeous table set with nothing more than three pineapples that had been spray painted gold, nestled in some evergreens and surrounded by ivory candles. To spark your imagination, walk through your house and see what's there. Look in your drawers and cabinets and you may well find decorating treasures.

You can't go wrong with candles. Candlelight is the kindest light of all, warm and cozy. Candles of various heights and diameters look especially lovely when grouped together on mirrored surfaces (if you don't have a mirrored tray, use a small wall mirror with the hanger on the back removed, or mirrored tile from the hardware store.) Whatever method you use to display them, however, it's best to use dripless candles. They're well worth the extra expense -- especially at cleanup time.

6. Make As Much As You Can As Far Ahead As You Can

Waiting until the last few days before your party to cook everything just doesn't make sense -- especially when, if you examine your menu, you'll see that much of it can be prepared ahead, frozen and reheated. Just pin up a reminder to yourself so you don't forget to defrost in time.

Don't rule out convenience foods: As far as I'm concerned, the bakery does a much better job of baking bread than I do. And why spend time washing and peeling baby carrots when they come packaged that way at the supermarket?

For those things that demand last-minute attention, don't be proud, be smart: Have meats and cheeses sliced at the grocery store. Buy packaged ice. The idea is to minimize your efforts so you haven't exhausted yourself before the party even begins.

7. Don't Drive Yourself Crazy Cleaning

Our advice: Don't attempt a top-to-bottom housecleaning before your party. Confine your efforts to the rooms your guests will see and use. And close the doors to the others.

But there is one place you should spend some time scrubbing: the bathroom. It's the one room by which your guests will judge the cleanliness of the whole house. Make sure it's spotless, and enhance the overall impression of clean by removing all the clutter -- toiletries, bathrobes, rubber duckies.

Clutter removal is key to the rest of your housecleaning too. Here's my technique: After you've done the bathroom, start cleaning where the guests will enter. Get rid of mail on the hall table. Stash the coats, the toys and the dog's leash. Cleaning as you go, proceed to your party rooms and remove newspapers and magazines. It's a great idea to clear off tables and countertops, too, because you'll need the space for food and drinks. Polish all wooden and glass surfaces, but do not bother cleaning the windows. Once your rooms are filled with people, no one will be looking out them anyway.

8. Keep Serving Simple

The elaborate passing of food, called French service, should be left to the French. Unless you have an army of waiters at your beck and call, self-service rules. For a small number of guests, a good arrangement is to place all the food, buffet-style, on one main table, and designate another table for the bar. However, the bigger the party, the more you ought to consider setting up several food areas so that everyone doesn't end up crowded in one spot. For example, use your coffee table for the hors d'oeuvres, your buffet top for the cheese platter, and a card table for coffee and sweets. One place you should avoid using for food service is your kitchen. During the party, it will be far too busy a place to have your guests gathering (and getting in the way). During your party, check often to see how everything looks, rearranging and replacing food as necessary. As food is finished, remove empty dishes, making sure everything looks as fresh for the last guest as it did for the first.

9. Ask For Help

One word separates the confident host from the person who swears she'll never entertain again as long as she lives: Help. And the larger your party, the more help you'll need. A bartender is particularly useful. Contact the placement office of your local college to find students who have bartending experience yet are much cheaper than professionals. Local colleges and high schools are also good sources for inexpensive waiters or even helpers to clean up after the party's over.

But if you really want to save money, the number one source of your household help should be...your household. As long as they've reached coat-carrying age, your children can -- and should -- pitch in. In fact, most kids love being more than just decorative accessories at their parents' parties. You may be pleasantly surprised to discover how good your children feel about helping to clear away

glasses, passing hors d'oeuvres and, yes, getting people's coats for them.

In addition, don't hesitate to look beyond your doors to relatives, close friends and coworkers. As long as you're gracious about it and ask in advance, most people are only too delighted to help out at parties. It's an opportunity for them to show off their talents and resourcefulness, and you can couple your request with a promise to reciprocate at their next big event.

10. Enjoy Yourself

The final commandment is both the hardest and the most important thing for a party giver to do. You've worked extra hard, you want everything to be perfect and you worry that your guests won't enjoy themselves if it isn't. But the truth is that most people are delighted to have someone go to all the trouble it takes to entertain. Your guests will never know that you forgot the cucumbers for the salad or that the dessert was store-bought -- and if they do figure it out, chances are they won't care. When they arrive, they'll be in a party mood and pleased just to have been invited. So take a deep breath before you open the door to your first guest and relax. This is going to be fun.

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